Descent and Inheritance

Descent is basically bilateral. Because personal property is destroyed at death and houses are torn down and abandoned, they cannot be inherited. Plots of pinenut trees are privately owned and are inherited bilaterally. The plots are marked by lines of stones. If an individual is discovered gathering in the wrong plot, the owner may take the intruder's pinenuts and break the implements he used. A person has the right to pick in his spouse's plot, but this right terminates at the death of the spouse. Barrett (1917) writes that each village has a hereditary chief, teūbčýū (Barrett's transcription), and that the office passes from father to son. Lowie (1939), on the other hand, says that one of his informants reported a teūbčýū for all the Washo; but he comments that this is probably a recent development. His informants did not know whether the chief inherited from his father. Our informants, as well as Lowie's, mention chiefs (teūbčýū) who, in aboriginal times, would call people together on ceremonial occasions and address them, telling them to behave properly. These chiefs had no authority beyond their ceremonial functions; there is no evidence concerning the possible inheritance of the office. Special headmen led the communal rabbit, antelope and deer hunts. According to Barrett (1917), the rabbit chief inherits his office, but Lowie (1939) says he is chosen by the people. Two of our informants, Nancy Emm and Roy James, say the rabbit chief inherited from his father. The antelope chief is a shaman who dreams the right to his office. Shamans do not inherit their positions. Any able hunter is the leader of a communal deer hunt (Barrett, 1917, 9, 12; Lowie, 1939, 303). Inheritance among the modern Washo is bilateral. Family names may be inherited from either the father or mother. Some of the marriages contracted by the younger Washo are of very brief duration, and in this circumstance the child often takes the family name of the mother. The offspring of more permanent unions take the father's name.

Family, Moiety, and Local Group

The nuclear family was the basic unit of aboriginal Washo social organization. The Washo practiced polygyny and therefore had some polygynous families. Whether the polygynous families ever reached a frequency of 20%, a figure that Murdock (1949, 28) uses to distinguish between societies with polygynous families and those with monogamous families, cannot be determined because polygyny is now prohibited by law and the Washo no longer practice it. According to our informants, the aboriginal Washo family was nuclear; none of the published sources contains contrary evidence. The modern Washo family is nuclear, but it sometimes includes a few other relatives.